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# Interview with Prof. Piet Meiring



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*Professor Piet Meiring was born in Johannesburg in 1941. He studied at the University of Pretoria, and at the Free University, Amsterdam. He was ordained to the ministry of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in 1968 and served in three congregations in Pretoria. His academic career includes the chair in Missiology and Church History, University of the North (Turfloop); a part-time lectureship at the University of South Africa*

(UNISA), and (since 1988) the chair in Science of Religion and Science of Mission at the Theological Faculty, University of Pretoria. In 1996, he was appointed to serve on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He retired in 2010, but is still engaged in writing and researching.

Professor Piet Meiring has been invited to lecture in South Africa and abroad on missiological, ecumenical, and developmental issues, as well as on the truth and reconciliation process in South Africa. He was involved in reconciliation initiatives in a number of countries, inter alia, Indonesia, Israel, Palestine, Ireland, Northern Ireland, England, The Netherlands, Switzerland, Fiji, Rwanda, India, Sri Lanka, and Canada. He has published widely, academic as well as popular books, and has contributed numerous peer-reviewed articles and chapters in books, locally and internationally.

**ML: I thoroughly enjoyed your recent book, *In daardie tyd was daar reuse* (Wellington: CLF, 2022). Congratulations and a sincere word of thanks and appreciation for sharing those “gigantic” stories and lessons with us. It is such a rich and interesting history that one encounters throughout those pages of your life. (I hope an English translation is on its way!) On the one hand, I have picked up a clear consistency in the tone and beat of the memoirs you share, which makes me curious to know more about the way in which your mind has changed throughout all of this. In short, as you reflect upon this rich and diverse tapestry of encounters, I am intrigued to know more about the change-in-thought that occurred in living through it all.**

PM: Thank you for your very kind words. I appreciate it, and the fact that you are taking note of my book in *Acta Theologica*, very much. I am glad that you enjoyed it; it gave me a lot of enjoyment as well, writing it. When some well-meaning friends at my 80<sup>th</sup> birthday urged me to try my hand at an autobiography, I declined. There was little in my life and my thinking that merited a book. But then I thought: I have met many people along my way, men and women who rightly may be considered giants of our time, who not only inspired me and enriched me, but also touched the lives of many around me. Their stories, I wanted to record.

Rereading letters of many years, paging through reports and press clippings, looking at old photographs, reliving experiences, once again listening to the voices of the “giants” was exhilarating. I realised how each of the giants had impacted my life, encouraging me to discover anew the meaning of the Gospel in the ever-changing context of South Africa. Looking back, I came to see how I was guided by them, from a somewhat naïve student and young *dominee*, to come to a better understanding of the challenges of our time, of what a commitment to Christ and his Kingdom really entails. I have learned from them,

from theologians – Jo Verkuyl, my Dutch mentor, David Bosch, Willie Jonker, and Johan Heyns; from church leaders, Beyers Naudé, Desmond Tutu, Sam Buti, and many others in South Africa and abroad. Meeting political leaders, above all getting to know Nelson Mandela, was an unforgettable experience. Serving on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission was life changing: a *dominee* from the DRC, the church that had supported apartheid, to listen to the stories of victims and perpetrators of apartheid, to experience the process of healing and forgiveness, was both harrowing and exhilarating.

**ML: Your interest in God and theology seems to come so “natural” to you. Would it be fair to say that embodying theology in the way you did, was always a given gift you knew from start to finish? How did it happen for you to pursue a life in theology?**

PM: It seems that I was predestined to become a minister. I come from a long line of DRC *dominees*. The first Meiring to come to South Africa, in 1743, was a pastor who was sent to Tulbach to start a new church. And in the generations that followed many Meirings followed suit. My grandfather and father were ministers – as is my son. My father was determined that I should not be bullied into the ministry, but at finishing school I did have a sense of being called. I enrolled at the University of Pretoria. I never looked back. Being a minister and doing theology became a life-long adventure. I was fortunate to try my hand at both, serving in three congregations, as well as at three Faculties of Theology. My field of study is Missiology, in David Bosch’s estimation the “mother of theology”, that offers perpetual challenges and adventures: trying to understand, and proclaim, the Good News of Christ in our ever-changing world. What an opportunity!

**ML: Of all the people you have met along the way, I have picked up that you have a special place for Prof. Jo Verkuyl’s influence on your life. What exactly is it that you have learned from him, and how has that relationship impacted upon your life?**

PM: Looking back, it was Jo Verkuyl who made me fall in love with Missiology. He was an interesting man, a missionary in Indonesia, a campaigner for human rights, and an inspiring lecturer. He was an ardent opponent of injustices across the world and often joined the students in the streets of Amsterdam, marching against the war in Vietnam - and against apartheid in South Africa. He never confronted me on apartheid, but he gave me books to read, and introduced me to Black South African students who visited Holland, and at the conclusion of my time at the Free University arranged for me to visit Berlin, and to attend a Christian Students’ conference in East Berlin, behind the infamous Wall. In many ways he opened my South African eyes to the wider world.

During my time at the Free University, also under Verkuyl's influence, it became clear to me that apartheid was indeed wrong, and that the DRC's easy acceptance of apartheid and the church's theological argument in favour of separate development were highly questionable. On coming back to South Africa, I kept in touch with Professor Verkuyl. He visited our country and spoke to audiences, also in Pretoria - after which I had my first of many encounters with the security police. When I was invited to serve on the TRC the aged professor sent me a long and encouraging letter.

**ML: What is your take on David Bosch and Desmond Tutu's legacy for us going forward? What are the bright and shadow sides that we need to be conscious of in remembering and honouring these iconic teachers from our church history? In short, how do we situate ourselves more nuancedly in "being after" them?**

PM: David Bosch and Archbishop Tutu were giants among the giants! David Bosch was the erudite scholar, a world leader in his field and a campaigner for justice and reconciliation in South Africa during the dark years of apartheid. Unlike Beyers Naudé, he chose not to leave the White DRC but to stay in the church, being "a prophet within the walls". It came at a price. Many Black colleagues criticised him harshly for remaining in the "White church". And within the DRC, Bosch was often marginalised. But he, generous in his relationships but uncompromising in his convictions, continued with his work to the day of his untimely death in a motor accident.

Desmond Tutu has become the icon of reconciliation in South Africa as well as in the world. It was my great privilege to get to know him well and to work with him on many occasions over the years. To be invited to serve with him on the TRC was a special gift. The Archbishop will be remembered for many things: his warm personality, his humour, his love for the Lord Jesus, his preaching, his many books, his unflinching opposition to apartheid and to all forms of injustice in society, and his deep commitment to healing and forgiveness in South Africa.

How to honour them, how to situate ourselves in "being after them"? First, by being serious in our commitment to the Lord, by enjoying being in the Presence, but also obedient to His call to follow Him into the world – even if it means carrying his cross with Him. Secondly, by taking God's Word seriously, by courageously studying the Bible, and reflecting on its message in our time – in a word, doing Theology the best we can. Lastly, by continuing to stand for justice and reconciliation in a country that still is in desperate need of healing and forgiveness.

**ML: What is your assessment of missiology's condition within the South African landscape? Is the discipline in a healthy state and place – and is the anticipated trajectory heading in the right direction? In short, what are the key lines of thought that currently (should) determine the state and future of missiology within the South African context?**

PM: Is Missiology in South Africa alive and well? Yes and No. On the one hand, the general acceptance of the *Missio Dei* perspective in both church and academia is heartening. When all the church's activities and ministries are seen in the light of God's Mission, one cannot but be grateful. And if all the theological disciplines come to accept mission as the "mother of theology" and start to discover the implications of the *Missio Dei* to each, the renewal of theology waits around the corner.

But there is a downside, too. It seems to me (and I may be wrong) that the current incorporation of Missiology at the Theological Faculties at Stellenbosch, Pretoria, and Bloemfontein, into the Department of Practical Theology, did not broaden the field of Mission Studies, but has narrowed it. Leadership studies and congregation studies seem to be high on the missiological agenda. But we need more. The rediscovery of the *Missio Dei* perspective, to my mind, should open a wide agenda, a new appreciation of the traditional missiological curriculum: mission theology, missionary theory and practice, the history of missions, studying the context of mission in our day, mission and ecumene, et cetera. Students also need a working knowledge of the other faiths, and guidance in the field of dialogue. The study of the other faiths is, understandably, currently housed in the different Departments of Religion, but taught as an elective course that students may or may not choose to take. In a land of many religions, where pastors have to advise their congregants on their relationships with people from other faiths, it seems that the study of the other religions should be on the main menu for all prospective ministers. But let me add, I am grateful that I am not alone in asking for a return to the traditional comprehensive Missiological curriculum. Recently, a number of scholars have been working hard to produce a new handbook for studying Mission in the African context, called *Mission, the "labour room" of Theology*. It is a publication to be taken seriously.

**ML: What texts would you like to highlight in reimagining missiology's canon in going forward? What is compulsory (classic, emerging, and underrated) material to study in doing missiology in our context?**

PM: Not an easy question to answer. So many books come to one's mind. Looking at older publications, I would like to mention three. David Bosch's *magnum opus*, *Transforming mission. Paradigm shifts in theology of mission*, was published more than 30 years ago (1991) but is still a must-read

for all interested in Missiology and Theology. Timothy Yates published a very valuable *Christian mission in the twentieth century* (1994) that merits our attention. I personally found a publication edited by Francis Du Bose on *Classics of Christian mission*, containing many of the classical texts on mission of the past 20 centuries, very helpful. Looking at the present, there are many to choose from, new editions of books by Lesslie Newbigin, Stephen Neill and others, as well as numerous publications on mission, evangelism, and dialogue published by the World Council of Churches. One of the most interesting authors of our time is the Dutch missiologist, Stefan Paas, who is a visiting professor at the University of Pretoria. His book *Pilgrims and priests: Christian mission in a post-Christian society* has much to teach us, also in the context of South Africa. Books on reconciliation abound. If I have to point to one that every student needs to read, it is John Paul Lederach's *Reconcile: Conflict transformation for ordinary Christians*. Finally, I gladly point to a number of publications by the Christian Literature Fund (Wellington), including *Missionary perspectives in the New Testament* (eds J. du Plessis, E. Orsmond and H.J. van Deventer); *South Africa – land of many religions* (eds A. and P. Meiring), and the above-mentioned *Mission, the "labour room" of theology* (ed. J. Knoetze). Two CLF publications on reconciliation in South Africa and abroad also merit careful reading: *Christ's love moves us to reconciliation and unity* (eds J. Knoetze and J. Pillay), and *Unfinished business. Faith communities and reconciliation in a post-TRC context* (eds. C.H. Thesnaar and L.D. Hansen).

**ML: There are a couple of places in your book where you articulate your disappointment in the fact that the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) has not yet been able to embrace the Belhar Confession. What are the reasons for this, and what should leadership do on our way towards embodying Belhar?**

PM: It is indeed sad – almost scandalous – that the DRC has not wholeheartedly, with joy and gratitude, embraced the Confession of Belhar. The General Synod, years ago, adopted it with a large majority, and then referred it to its regional synods for ratification with the requirement of a two-thirds majority. In most cases, the synods did vote in favour of Belhar but failed to reach the required 66%. History will show what a huge opportunity the DRC has lost, how poorer we have become because of that. Many denominations, Reformed churches in Europe and America, have adopted Belhar as a creed, not only including it in their Sunday liturgies, but also discussing it and drawing insight and inspiration from it. Belhar is indeed a unique confession, applying the principles of the Bible and of our Reformed faith, to the issues of justice, unity, and reconciliation. And it is from Africa – in the tradition of the great African theologian of many centuries ago, Augustine of Hippo!

The reasons for the reluctance in DRC circles to embrace the Confession of Belhar are many. Some critics (erroneously) regarded it as a typical Black theology-liberation theology statement. Others were willing to accept Belhar as an important document, but hesitated to include it in the list of classical ecumenical and Reformed creeds. In the painful and slow process towards the reunification of the DRC family, Belhar was always high on the agenda. The uncompromising stance of the Uniting Reformed Church (URCSA) that Belhar had to be adopted as a creed by all (to which I subscribe) was seen as an obstacle to unity by many in the DRC. My experience sitting in the ranks of the DRC was that some of my colleagues, who were not overly enthusiastic about uniting with URCSA, were rather grateful for the “obstacle”. Both the DRC and URCSA have serious issues to contend with at the moment. Both have to work hard at solving the internal divisions that take up much of their time and enthusiasm. Energy for working towards reunification seems to be at a low level. With this, Belhar has slipped down the agenda. To remedy this, to rekindle the flame of unity, requires a special kind of leadership: men and women who in answer to Jesus’ prayer in John 17 (“that they may be one!”) reach out to one another in love and understanding, in humility and with hope, committing themselves to walk the long road to reconciliation and unity together. And may I add, joyfully embracing the Confession of Belhar together.

**ML: You gave in your recent book the work of the Truth & Reconciliation Commission (TRC) a mark of 75%. Will you please put that into further perspective? For instance, I sense amongst an increasing number of colleagues and students an ever-growing disillusionment and anger regarding the eventual outcomes of the TRC. Why does the TRC continue to score so high in your book? Moreover, what does this imply for us going forward?**

PM: Giving the TRC a mark of 75% is rather high – but you must remember that having been a member of the Commission, I am not the most objective of judges! But I do think that the TRC did a necessary job rather well. In the early years of our democracy, it helped create a climate for reconciliation and nation-building. The many hearings helped the truth of what had happened in South Africa during the apartheid years to come to the fore. Not *all* the truth. Important information that was promised by senior officers in the defence force and police did not make its way to the TRC. But, in general, by researching the story of apartheid South Africa and by offering a number of proposals for reconciliation and national healing, the TRC did do the country a great service. In many countries across the globe, the South African TRC has become a benchmark, by which similar processes were informed and guided.

The many victims who shared their stories at the TRC hearings experienced that they were not forgotten, and many of them were helped along the way of healing and forgiveness. I will never forget the words of an elderly gentleman from Soweto at a Johannesburg hearing: “When I was tortured at John Vorster Square, my tormentor sneered: ‘You can shout your lungs out; nobody will ever hear you!’ Now, after all these years, people *are* hearing me”. For the perpetrators who after long deliberation received amnesty, the process brought a new lease on life.

But you are right. There are many, today, who are disillusioned and angry at the TRC process and especially at its outcomes. Many victims who were promised proper reparation had to wait a very long time before the South African Government started with payments, and when it eventually did happen, it was very little and very late. The criticism uttered by Allan Boesak, amongst others, that the TRC’s justice and reconciliation focused mainly on the plight of individual victims and not on the victim communities that suffered under apartheid as well, needs to be taken seriously. The deliberate choice that was made for restorative justice over against retributive justice in the TRC process was questioned by many – even in our day. Part of the disillusionment, in my experience, has to do with the fact that we as South Africans often see very little of reconciliation and forgiveness in our time. Desmond Tutu warned that reconciliation is a process, not a once-off event. But the process, seemingly, still has a very long way to go.

**ML: The theme of hope is not only explicitly prominent on the last pages of your book, but to my mind sets the tone from the start in everything you share with us. I find that fascinating, because most of the time the content might leave many of us in despair. In short, please say, on the one hand, more about that characteristic cheerfulness and joy with which you often approached some very difficult situations and challenges throughout your life. What sort of piety and spirituality have driven you in navigating these situations? Secondly, on the other hand, what are the key (and very concrete) coordinates in the theology of hope and expectancy that you are calling upon us to embody here and now?**

PM: Reflecting on the cheerfulness and joy that you mention, I have to take you back half a century when I had to decide on the subject for my doctoral thesis. The choice, with Verkuyl’s encouragement, fell on the theology of Max Warren, the Anglican missionary theologian who helped English Christians rise from the ruins and despair of the Second World War. Eschatology was the leitmotiv of his thinking. His call to the Christian community was the challenge of hope. The final message of the Bible, he maintained, is of the triumph of God. God is the God of history, of the past, the present, and the future. We are in no doubt, we know *what* and *Whom* to expect.



The implications of looking at the world through an eschatological lens has enormous implication for us, for the church, and for our mission to the world. The church, Warren wrote, lives “between the times”, between the coming of Jesus and the second coming of the Lord, between, to quote Oscar Cullmann, D-Day and Victory Day! The church should see itself as “a preparing community”. The congregants should embrace one another “as a brotherhood of expectancy”. The church needs to translate its hope into action, living as if today is our last – yet carefully planning for a thousand years. The attitude of the church should be “an attitude of expectancy – not a passive waiting for God, but an active preparation of the mind, a belief in things not seen”. The church is not the Kingdom of God, the church is serving the Kingdom. “The Church is the ‘becoming’ community, or to put it more clearly, it is the ‘preparing’ community, the worldwide company of those who are preparing for the Day of God which is not yet”. This puts everything the church is doing in the world, in its local community, in a new light. In terms of the mission of the church, the message is clear. The church exists because of its mission.

I was fascinated by Warren’s thinking. “Expectant evangelism”, he said, meant that we should re-examine our missionary aims, agendas and methods, that we should radically re-evaluate our priorities. In his seminal book *The truth of vision* Warren wrote: “Any effective prosecution of the Church’s primary task of evangelism in the world of our time must depend upon the nature of its hope. What is more, the nature of that hope will largely determine the character of that evangelism.”

Warren’s message stayed with me throughout my days. Living in hope was what made sense in my life and ministry – in good times as well as in difficult times. And hope produces joy. Paul’s prayer continued to sustain me: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 15:13).

What sort of piety and spirituality has driven me in navigating challenging situations?, you ask. I am not sure that I have achieved a special kind of piety and spirituality. But I can point you to Desmond Tutu, for whom I have the utmost respect, and from whom I have learned much. His piety and spirituality, and his joy in the Lord, was contagious. In the midst of a very busy programme, Tutu, at lunchtime, every day, excused himself for an hour, for prayer and meditation. He was totally at peace with God, conscious of the hand that held him, ready to face every challenge along the way.

In his last letter, weeks before his death, the Archbishop once again shared the secret of his life with me: “Piet, I cannot help it. I am a prisoner of hope!”.

The key coordinates of a theology of hope? I refer you to what Max Warren has written about the church as a preparing community and a brotherhood of expectancy. Can the same be said of doing theology? Allow me to paraphrase Warren's words (above): Any effective prosecution of the church's task of developing a relevant theology in the world must depend upon the nature of its hope. What is more, the nature of that hope will largely determine the character of our theology.

What does living in hope entail? C.D. Moule, a colleague of Max Warren, wrote: "Hope is not a calculated security; on the contrary, the first requisite if we are to possess hope is that we should be dispossessed of security and instead should daringly and at absolute risk, cast ourselves trustfully into the deep which is God's character. To hug the shore is to cherish a disappointing hope; really to let myself go and swim is to have discovered the buoyancy of hope".